By far the most intellectually and politically interesting thing about the recent "exposé" of Spokane, WA, NAACP activist Rachel Dolezal's racial status is the conundrum it has posed for racial identitarians who are also committed to defense of transgender identity. The comparisons between Dolezal and Republican Jenner (I've decided to opt for that referent because it is an identity continuous between "Bruce" and "Caitlyn" and is moreover the one most meaningful to me) began almost instantly, particularly as a flood of mass-mediated Racial Voices who support the legitimacy of transgender identity objected strenuously to suggestions that Dolezal's representation, and apparent perception, of herself as black is similar to Bruce Jenner's perception of himself as actually Caitlyn. Their contention is that one kind of claim to an identity at odds with culturally constructed understandings of the identity appropriate to one's biology is okay but that the other is not – that it's OK to feel like a woman when you don't have the body of a woman and to act like (and even get yourself the body of) a woman but that it's wrong to feel like a black person when you're actually white and that acting like you're black and doing your best to get yourself the body of a black person is just lying.

The way Zeba Blay puts it, on the Black Voices section of the HuffPo, is by declaring how important it is to "make one thing clear: transracial identity is not a thing." What is clear is that it's not at all clear what that statement is supposed to mean. It seems to suggest that transracial identity is not something that has been validated by public recognition, or at least that Blay has not heard of or does not recognize it. But there's an obvious problem with this contention. There was a moment, not that long ago actually, when transgender identity was not a "thing" in that sense either. Is Blay's contention that we should accept transgender identity only because it is now publicly recognized? If so, the circularity is obvious, and the lack of acceptance arguably only a matter of time. Transgender wasn't always a thing – just ask Christine Jorgensen.

"There is no coherent, principled defense of the stance that transgender identity is legitimate but transracial is not."

But the more serious charge is the moral one, that, as Michelle Garcia puts it, "It's pretty clear: Dolezal has lied." But here too, it's not clear what's so clear. Is the point supposed to be that Dolezal is lying when she says she identifies as black? Or is it that being black has nothing to do with how you identify? The problem with the first claim is obvious – how do they know? And on what grounds does Jenner get to be telling the truth and Dolezal not? But the problem with the second claim is even more obvious since if you think there's some biological fact of the matter about what race people actually belong to utterly independent of what race they think they belong to, you're committed to a view of racial difference as biologically definitive in a way that's even deeper than sexual difference.

Blay attempts to deal with these issues by quoting Darnell L. Moore of Mic.com's analysis that "In attempting to pass as black, Dolezal falsely represented her identity. Trans people don't lie about their gender identities — they express their gender according to categories that reflect who they are." This claim has recurred in various formulations. Meredith Talusan asserts it most emphatically in The Guardian:

> The fundamental difference between Dolezal’s actions and trans people’s is that her decision to identify as black was an active choice, whereas transgender people’s decision to transition is almost always involuntary. Transitioning is the product of a fundamental aspect of our humanity – gender – being foisted upon us over and over again from the time of our birth in a manner inconsistent with our own experience of our genders. Doctors don’t announce our race or color when we are born; they announce our gender. People who are alienated from their presumed gender and define themselves
This assessment is mind-bogglingly wrong-headed, but it is at the same time deeply revealing of the contradictoriness and irrationality that undergird so much self-righteous identitarian twaddle. First of all, as I've already suggested, the claim that Dolezal's identity is false and transgendered people's are true immediately provokes a "Who says?" What makes Talusan's and other transgender people's identities authentic is that they believe them to be authentic. We agree to accept transgender people's expression of belief in their authenticity. It's fine for Talusan or others to say that they are convinced that the identities they embrace are their real ones in some way that is not limited by their biology at birth. However, the logic of the pluralism and open-endedness of identity they assert would require that they also accept the self-reports of claims to authenticity regarding identities that may diverge in other ways from convention. Certainly, not doing so necessitates some justification more persuasive—and less Archie Bunkerish—than simply asserting "Mine is genuine, theirs is not." The voluntary/involuntary criterion isn't even sophistry; it's just bullshit. Once again, who says? Who gave Talusan, Moore, Blay and others the gifts of telepathic mindreading and ventriloquy? How do we know that Dolezal may not sense that she is "really" black in the same, involuntary way that many transgender people feel that they are "really" transgender?

The related complaint that Dolezal's self-representation is inauthentic because she "lied" about her identity is equally fatuous. To stay within the identitarian paradigm, what did Republican Jenner do for more than six decades of operating as Bruce? What does any transgender person do before the moment of coming out?

Michelle Garcia, also at Mic.com, asks, imagining that her question is a trump, "If Caitlyn Jenner can identify as a woman, why can't Rachel Dolezal say that she's black?" But why should that be the definitive criterion for accepting the self-representation? Who made that rule? Could there be something about public expectations at this point regarding the fixity of racial boundaries that would stay Dolezal from taking the bold step of announcing that she had always "known" herself to be black? The furor that has surrounded the "exposeé" would suggest that is the case. Would she have felt free to do so if public awareness already accepted the possibility of racial identity as not necessarily tied to official classification? I have no idea whether she would have, and Garcia doesn't either. And, again, what about the 60+ years before Republican Jenner emerged publicly as Caitlyn? Was his privately embraced identity as Caitlyn bogus for all those years because he didn't, or felt he couldn't, go public with it?

This brings me to the most important point that this affair throws into relief. It has outed the essentialism on which those identitarian discourses rest. Garcia asks "So why don't we just accept Dolezal as black? Because she's not." But why is she not black in Garcia's view? Well, "Her parents say she's not even close to being black." But what would that mean — that she has no known black ancestry? Is blackness, then, a matter of hypodescent after all? But, if that's what it is, then what politically significant meaning does the category have? Dolezal no doubt has her issues and idiosyncrasies, but, especially if the judgment of the NAACP counts for anything in the matter, I'm pretty sure I'd take her in a trade for Clarence Thomas, Cory Booker, Condi Rice, and five TFA pimps to be named later. Or would Dolezal's "not even close to being black" mean that she was raised outside of "authentic" black idiom or cultural experience? But whose black idiom or cultural experience would that be? Is there really an irreducible, definitive one? If so, on which Racial Voice blog or Ivy League campus might we find it?

The essentialism cuts in odd ways in this saga. Sometimes race is real in a way that sex is not — you're black only if you meet the biological criteria (whatever they're supposed to be) for blackness. And sometimes, as in Talusan's failure to distinguish gender from sex typing, gender is "real" in a way that race is not. "Doctors don't announce our race or color when we are born; they announce our gender." I assume Talusan is referring to the stereotypical moment in the delivery room. Technically, though, the doctor announces the child's sex type, not its culturally constructed gender roles. And when exactly does Talusan presume race is determined and by whom? I'm pretty sure that in most of the United States it's still marked on one's birth certificate. That's not the delivery room, but it's
pretty damn close.

Talusan’s confusion of sex and gender is startlingly naïve. She contends that gender is a "product of a fundamental aspect of our humanity" and that, unlike race, the medieval European invention, gender is a "fundamental attribute" of our existence. But gender is no less culturally constructed than race. If Talusan were a little more curious anthropologically than precocious, she might have noticed that the relation between sex type and gender roles has varied wildly over the history and range of our species. But she, like Jenner, Hugh Hefner, and legions of anti-feminists, among others, naturalizes gender as melded into sex type: "Trans people transition in order to be the gender we feel inside." For those to whom it seems odd or tendentious to link the naturalizing discourses of some transgender activists and hoary anti-feminism, I recommend Elinor Burkett’s fine rumination on the issue in the June 6 New York Times, titled "What Makes a Woman?".

"As is ever clearer and ever more important to note, race politics is not an alternative to class politics; it is a class politics."

There is a guild-protective agenda underlying racial identitarians’ outrage about Dolezal that is also quite revealing. Nikki Lynette, writing at Red Eye exhorts "Don’t Compare NAACP's Rachel Dolezal to Caitlyn Jenner." Why? Because, she contends, Dolezal benefited materially from her self-representation as black. Putting aside for the moment Republican Jenner’s orchestrated payday surrounding announcement and display of transition, this is an unusual charge, one that is counterintuitive in relation to several generations of black American humor and also smacks a bit of right-wingers’ insinuations about whites taking advantage of affirmative action. Nevertheless, like Zeba Blay and others, Lynette rehearses a charge that Dolezal received a full scholarship to the Howard University MFA program on the pretext that she was a black woman. That charge is false; not only was she not admitted as black person (Howard’s applications apparently didn’t require racial identification); reports from faculty and students when she was there confirmed that she was not understood to be black when she was enrolled at the university. See Hillary Crosley Coker, "When Rachel Dolezal Attended Howard, She Was White," at Jezebel. The charge is what those making it want to be true; they assume it's true because they understand black racial classification as a form of capital.

Blay expresses this position most clearly. She objects that Dolezal "occupied positions of power specifically designated for members of a marginalized group." Blay is referring, in addition to the false accusation about the circumstances of Dolezal’s matriculation at Howard, to her having belonged, while an undergraduate at Bellhaven College, to "a racial reconciliation community development project where blacks and whites lived together." Blay presents membership in that group as though it were precursor to her having duped Howard out of a fellowship that should have gone to a black woman. To Blay this pattern of duplicity culminated in Dolezal’s "eventually working her way up to president of the Spokane NAACP in 2014." (Some have included a charge that Dolezal used racial misrepresentation to advance an academic career; an occasional stint as an adjunct instructor, however, doesn’t square with the Iggy Azalea imagery that seems to propel this claim. It certainly would be a skimpy reward for such prodigious self-fashioning.) In Blay’s narrow political universe, the NAACP branch presidency is an honorific to be awarded on the basis of ascriptive categories like race and gender, not the result of effective work on behalf of the Association’s mission and goals. It is especially striking in this regard that a number of those exercised by Dolezal have at least implicitly called for the NAACP to renounce its support of her. Their commitment to arbitrary notions of racial propriety should override the Association’s sense of its own concrete priorities in the actual struggle for civil rights and social justice.

When all is said and done, the racial outrage is about protection of the boundaries of racial authenticity as the exclusive property of the guild of Racial Spokespersonship. (Blay also, with no hint of self-consciousness, complains that Dolezal’s deception has "hijacked the conversation about race, during a week where the nation was focusing on police brutality in McKinney, Texas." Not only is that insipid "conversation about race" chatter the equivalent of fingernails on a chalkboard. It seems that Blay hasn’t discerned that the Dolezal issue has captured such attention only because it rankles the sensibilities of those who essentialize race and that no one is making her
 Beneath all the puerile cultural studies prattle about "cultural appropriation" – which can only occur if "culture" is essentialized as the property of what is in effect a "race" [see Walter Benn Michaels, "Race Into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity," Critical Inquiry 18 (Summer 1992): 655-685] – "same heritage and social struggles" (I doubt that Nikki Lynette was at Greensboro on February 1, 1960, Ft. Wagner on July 18, 1863, Little Rock in September, 1957, Colfax, Louisiana on April 13, 1873, the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike, either of the Amenia conferences, or Minton's Playhouse any time in the 1940s), and Orwellian chatter about privilege and "disprivilege," the magical power of "whiteness," etc. lies yet another iteration in what literature scholar Kenneth Warren has identified in his masterful 2012 study, What Was African American Literature? , as a more than century-old class program among elements of the black professional-managerial stratum to establish "managerial authority over the nation's Negro problem."

That is to say, as is ever clearer and ever more important to note, race politics is not an alternative to class politics; it is a class politics, the politics of the left-wing of neoliberalism. It is the expression and active agency of a political order and moral economy in which capitalist market forces are treated as unassailable nature. An integral element of that moral economy is displacement of the critique of the invidious outcomes produced by capitalist class power onto equally naturalized categories of ascriptive identity that sort us into groups supposedly defined by what we essentially are rather than what we do. As I have argued, following Walter Michaels and others, within that moral economy a society in which 1% of the population controlled 90% of the resources could be just, provided that roughly 12% of the 1% were black, 12% were Latino, 50% were women, and whatever the appropriate proportions were LGBT people. It would be tough to imagine a normative ideal that expresses more unambiguously the social position of people who consider themselves candidates for inclusion in, or at least significant staff positions in service to, the ruling class.

This perspective may help explain why, the more aggressively and openly capitalist class power destroys and marketizes every shred of social protection working people of all races, genders, and sexual orientations have fought for and won over the last century, the louder and more insistent are the demands from the identitarian left that we focus our attention on statistical disparities and episodic outrages that "prove" that the crucial injustices in the society should be understood in the language of ascriptive identity. The Dolezal/Jenner contretemps stoked the protectionist reflexes of identitarian spokesperson guilds because it troubles current jurisdictional boundaries. Even before that, however, some racial identitarians had grown bolder in laying bare the blur of careerism and arbitrary, self-serving moralism at the base of this supposed politics. In an unintentionally farcical homage to Black Power era radicalism, various racial ventriloquists claiming to channel the Voices of the Youth leadership of the putative Black Lives Matter "movement" have lately been arguing that the key condition for a left alliance is that we all must "respect black leadership." Of course, that amounts to a claim to shut up and take whatever anyone who claims that status says or does. Those of us old enough to remember Black Power and the War on Poverty also will look around to see which funders or employers they're addressing.

And, in apparent contradiction of the ontological principle of group authenticity on which the paradigm rests, reprise of the tawdriest features of Black Power hustling isn’t available only to officially recognized people of color. Joan Walsh, apparently having learned the strictures of "white allyship" from being chastened by prima inter pares bourgeois identitarian Melissa Harris-Perry, recently showed the depths of crude opportunism this discourse enables when she race-baited Bernie Sanders as an instrument of her effort to pimp for Hillary Clinton (see her "White Progressives’ Racial Myopia: Why Their Colorblindness Fails Minorities – And the Left "). For Walsh, it seems, black people don’t count among the millions who would be helped by Sanders’s social-democratic agenda, but Clinton, presumably, would show proper respect by hooking them up with a #Blacklivesmatter Facebook like.

"In addition to the problems of articulating what confers racial authenticity, if what we have read about [Dolezal's] approach to expressing black racial identity is accurate, she seems to have embraced an essentialist version of being black no less than do her outraged critics."
I’ll conclude by returning to the Dolezal/Jenner issue. I can imagine an identitarian response to my argument to the effect that I endorse some version of wiggerism, or the view that “feeling black” can make one genuinely black. The fact is that I think that formulation is wrong-headed either way one lines up on it. Each position – that one can feel or will one’s way into an ascriptive identity or that one can’t – presumes that the “identity” is a thing with real boundaries. The issue of the line that Dolezal, who has now resigned her NAACP position, crossed that made her alleged self-representation unacceptable is interesting in this regard only because it highlights contradictions at the core of racial essentialism. In addition to the problems of articulating what confers racial authenticity, if what we have read about her approach to expressing black racial identity is accurate, she seems to have embraced an essentialist version of being black no less than do her outraged critics. Wiggers do so as well, and we must admit that Dolezal’s performance and apparent embrace of culturally recognized representations of black womanhood rests on an aesthetic purporting to embody respect and celebration rather than the demeaning racialist fantasies that shape the commercial personae of the likes of Iggy Azalea. Moreover, even if Dolezal may suffer from something like racial dysmorphia, the expression of her fixation has been tied up with commitment to struggle for social justice. She may have other personal problems and strained or bad relations with family members, but those are matters that concern her and those with whom she interacts. They do not automatically impeach the authenticity of her feelings of who she "really" is. And I doubt that we’d want to start a scorecard comparing her and Republican Jenner on that front.

That points to the other way that this affair has exposed identitarianism’s irrational underbelly. The fundamental contradiction that has impelled the debate and required the flight into often idiotic sophistry is that racial essentialitarians assume, even if they give catechistic lip service – a requirement of being taken seriously outside Charles Murray’s world – to the catchphrase that “race is a social construction,” that race is a thing, an essence that lives within us. If pushed, they will offer any of a range of more or less mystical, formulaic, breezy, or neo-Lamarckian faux explanations of how it can be both an essential ground of our being and a social construct, and most people are willing not to pay close attention to the justificatory patter. Nevertheless, for essentialitarians, to paraphrase Michaels, we aren’t, for instance, black because we do black things; that seems to have been Dolezal’s mistaken wish. We do black things because we are black. Doing black things does not make us black; being black makes us do black things. That is how it’s possible to talk about having lost or needing to retrieve one’s culture or define "cultural appropriation" as the equivalent, if not the prosaic reality, of a property crime. That, indeed, is also the essence of essentialism.

The problem the Jenner comparison poses is that, if identity is inherent in us in ways that are beyond our volition, how can we legitimize transgender identity—which is gender identity that does not conform with that conventionally associated with biological sex type—without the psychological stigma of dysmorphia? Confounding of sex and gender is the ideological mechanism that seems to resolve that conundrum. Thus, notwithstanding my earlier suggestion that Talusan misses the cultural fluidity of gender because she is naïve anthropologically, she may also have an important ideological reason to deny it. It is only by treating gender roles as somehow endowed at birth that she can contend that transgender identity is "almost always involuntary." That is, in the context of essentializing political discourse, gender identity must express a condition as "natural" or inherent equivalent, or prior, to biological sex type. Transgender identity requires being read as in effect "hardwired" only within a normative framework in which access to the domain of recognizable identity deserving of civic regard depends on essentialist claims, and the only way transgender identity can meet that standard is to collapse distinctions between sex and gender – even though that move, as Burkett argues, cuts against the grain of the perspective the women’s movement has fought to advance for at least the last half-century. Nor does this view acknowledge the grave political mischief ideologies of essential human difference have underwritten in not at all distant history, from segregation and other forms legal discrimination and imposition of separate spheres to genocide.

The transrace/transgender comparison makes clear the conceptual emptiness of the essentializing discourses, and the opportunist politics, that undergird identitarian ideologies. There is no coherent, principled defense of the stance that transgender identity is legitimate but transracial is not, at least not one that would satisfy basic rules of argument. The debate also throws into relief the reality that a notion of social justice that hinges on claims to entitlement based on extra-societal, ascriptive identities is neoliberalism’s critical self-consciousness. In insisting on
the political priority of such fictive, naturalized populations identitarianism meshes well with neoliberal naturalization of the structures that reproduce inequality. In that sense it’s not just a pointed coincidence that Dolezal’s critics were appalled with the NAACP for standing behind her work. It may be that one of Rachel Dolezal’s most important contributions to the struggle for social justice may turn out to be having catalyzed, not intentionally to be sure, a discussion that may help us move beyond the identitarian dead end.